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## Croatian Strategy of Multilateralism: Investment in Becoming a Regional Leader towards the EU

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### *Summary*

Should Croatia focus significant efforts of its foreign policy towards neighbouring countries and their accession process to the EU membership? Could the potential turn towards pro-active politics of helping Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Montenegro in the EU accession process actually become one of the key actions in establishing Croatia as an important new EU member that can act in the mutual and long-term interest of the Union? Possible strong co-operation of Croatia with other Western Balkan states in their accession process could be one of the most beneficial potential mid-term goals for Croatian foreign policy. Such theoretical focus-shift could become the impetus of establishing itself as a desired role of a regional leader on a long-term basis – especially considering the policies of the EU and the USA with their vision of the future of the South Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans in the forthcoming decade. Unilateral policies towards neighbouring candidate countries, as displayed by Slovenia towards Croatia during its accession process, should be absolutely ruled out for the sake of Croatia's own interest. Deliberately avoiding any similarities with the negative image attained by Slovenia because of the way it has treated the Croatian accession process, Croatia should present itself as a *problem-solver* and not a *problem-maker* – which will be the best long-term strategy in positioning the country on the new global map that will be established once the current EU crisis ends and further enlargement becomes the focus of the EU once again.

**Keywords:** *Croatia, EU, foreign policy, the Balkans, multilateralism*

In the summer of 2013, Croatia became the 28<sup>th</sup> member of the European Union. It took two decades after becoming a new sovereign country with the intention of becoming part of the European family from the very first moment of its independence

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to finalize the accession – in which process more than a full decade was dedicated to meeting the conditions for membership. That goal – often seen as the very finale of the third phase of Croatian foreign policy implementation (Jović, 2011:8-14) – has largely shaped the focus of Croatian foreign policy in the past ten years. Despite numerous obstacles, many of which were reasoned by domestic policy issues and non-constructive behaviour of domestic policy actors, Croatia has entered the EU family of states on July 1, 2013.

The moment of 2013 Croatian EU accession is dramatic – the ongoing financial crisis and its repercussions have increased the pace of transition of the EU towards the “state of imbalance” (Toje, 2010:3).<sup>1</sup> The limitation of potential new foreign-policy chances and developments imposed by the ongoing crisis and the change of focus of major EU countries towards solving the flaming economy issues, where new problems of new members can only be seen as an unwanted distraction, opens up a new possibility for Croatia: to change the way it approaches the region and to develop a new mid-term strategy in order to gain maximum from its new, strengthened position as a full EU member. Positioning itself as a leader in regional multilateral cooperation and establishing itself as a country that can be of constructive help to the EU to solve the other great problem – *the Challenge of the Balkans* (Rupnik, 2009:4)<sup>2</sup> – can make a significant positive impact on Croatia’s position within the EU and the international system in the years to come.

As a member, Croatia will have to alter its objectives and priorities towards other EU members and do whatever it can to establish itself as a recognizable, constructive and lucrative EU state. Foreign policy will be one of the main pillars of such establishment and the forthcoming period will be crucial for the shaping of Croatian image within the EU family. In shaping the scholar framework of the future development of Croatian policy Dejan Jović outlines one of the main dilemmas: should Croatia follow its own course of foreign policy or should it primarily take into account the mutual interest of the Union by incorporating its goals and specific national interests into the boundaries of the mutual EU foreign policy?<sup>3</sup> Although the establishment of EU Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) has produced great results in creating a more unified perspective for issues such as security and defence diplomacy,<sup>4</sup> the actual creation of a unified foreign policy of the EU remains a goal yet to be met. Asle Toje observes the

1 In his assessment of the recent state of the international system Toje questions the shapes of the new multipolarity where Europe will again become dependent on the US.

2 Rupnik concludes how, for the EU, the Balkans requires rethinking of its concept of enlargement, which cannot be a replica of the pattern successfully implemented in Central Europe.

3 *ibid.*

4 At this moment there are 15 ongoing worldwide CFSP missions and 11 that are completed over the course of 10 years.

ongoing inability of the EU to create any kind of comprehensive foreign policy for time to come, where the EU “has the interests of a great power but the dependency and capacity of a small power, with the fact that Europe’s security obligations have grown to be increasingly disproportional to its ability to live up to them”. Imposing the idea of the EU as a small power, he highlights the new future of EU foreign policy as dependent on the US mainly because Toje describes how the “external policies of the EU have failed to live up to the expectations. The Europeans have failed to integrate their foreign policy outlooks, aspirations and capabilities” (Toje, 2010).<sup>5</sup>

The current focus of the leading EU members towards solving the dangerous and frightening outcomes of the economic crisis – that is, the undermining of the future of the EU at this very moment (Levy, 2012)<sup>6</sup> – outlines the moment of Croatia’s accession. Croatia has joined the EU at its most problematic moment in history, where there is no real place for exercising the potential boundaries of foreign policy acting as a new member. For the first time after 1981 there is only one country joining the EU in the enlargement and at this moment there are no real announcements about potential dates for a next enlargement process. Even the most optimistic analysts are conservative towards any date prior to 2018 for any of either candidates or potential candidate countries (with the only possible exception of Iceland). And all of that will put Croatia in a very delicate position. From one perspective, the current focus of the EU is solving the problems of the economic crisis that threatens the very foundation of the Union, and the accession of Croatia will probably be seen as formally positive and important, but it probably will not be a matter of real focus of the EU leaders. On the other hand, Croatia has to adapt to a new system and start capitalizing over its new status of an EU member as fast as it can, and in all fields imaginable – with foreign policy as one of the main fields.

During that period of adaptation and the beginning of a new phase of its foreign relations as a modern state, Croatian foreign policy actors should take a few important issues into consideration: firstly, the EU has a long-term plan of accessing all ex-Yugoslav countries to the Union.<sup>7</sup> Secondly, the US has a strong long-term impetus towards remaining a visible and an active actor in South Eastern Europe and it will further stren-

5 Toje also debates about a potential point of “return to history”.

6 As Lévy pointed out in his September 2012 open letter in front of European intellectuals: “Either Europe takes one more step, passing a mark in the path to this political integration without which no single currency will succeed in enduring, or it leaves History and sinks into chaos. We no longer have a choice – it is political union or death.”

7 In his latest speech at the EPP Group conference “Western Balkans: A future with Europe” in Brussels, Štefan Füle, European Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighborhood Policy outlined how “for all the countries of the Western Balkans, important milestones on the European path are within reach, if the conditions are met”.

gthen its position in the Western Balkans, which is a very important development for the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro and Kosovo.<sup>8</sup> And thirdly, the behaviour of Slovenia during the Croatian accession process – especially the border and maritime disputes from 2008 and 2009 as well as recent development of the problem of Ljubljanska banka – has been seen by the EU as deeply problematic unilateral behaviour of one EU member towards the accessing member. Although there were no official EU Council statements regarding 2013 Slovenia's threats ratifying Croatian treaty for EU accession, many European politicians and members of the EU Parliament clearly highlighted how Slovenia's unilateral policy was not welcome in the EU. At the very peak of EU's pressure, Hannes Swoboda, the President of the deputy group of the Socialists and Democrats (S&D) in the European Parliament, said in Koper: "There has not been an example in the last decades of a country that went through accession talks and got broad support but then saw its accession hindered by one member state. The EU expects Slovenia and Croatia to deal with their open issues in a way that will not hinder the ratification of Croatia's accession treaty. The responsibility of politicians should be to make sure that things go in that direction regardless of their domestic political situation. If Slovenia failed to ratify Croatia's treaty, this would be bad not only for the EU and Croatia, but also for Slovenia." Elmar Brok, the chairman of the European Parliament Committee on Foreign Affairs, was cited on the same subject in leading European media: "It is completely unacceptable to hold up the expansion process with such bilateral problems." Slovenia's doings were not overlooked nor ignored.

When observed within the same framework, those three issues share one similar outset: they can be seen as a foundation for establishing a theoretical context of a future Croatian foreign policy within the EU, focused on proactive work towards helping neighbouring countries actually become EU members from its own, almost a decade long experience – which could greatly benefit Croatia's newfound image and its position within the EU and the international community.

And for Croatia, there is much of the international image left to be desired. As described by Subotić and Zarakol: "When a country is chastised by other international actors, the state identity is threatened because modern states derive part of their legitimacy from their ability to gain recognition and respect on the international stage. This means that the international criticism cannot be brushed off easily, without re-imagining the national identity in some way." In the same paper they challenge the interesting field of cultural intimacy of states with a case-study of Croatia as a country hindered by what they call *a state of embarrassment* (Subotić and Zarakol, 2011:13-15).

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8 In his address from October 2012, Philip T. Reeker, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, stated how "the strength of our [US] engagement with the [Western Balkan] region [...] has never been clearer than it was in the last several months".

Although domestic actors tend to avoid such notions deliberately, it is very visible – even on the example of the EU accession process – that many complaints and obstacles Croatia faced were in fact the result of its behaviour during the last two decades.<sup>9</sup> New potential focus, towards becoming a leading integrative force within the region, would also dramatically help in building a whole new international recognition of Croatia. However, such focusing would not be easy because of specific relations and various unsolved disputes with the neighbouring countries nor would it come without obstacles in the domestic field.

From a declarative point of view, the Croatian policy elite already advocates the EU (and NATO) enlargement to all countries of South Eastern Europe and especially the Western Balkans, with a strong emphasis on their accession being the Croatian national interest (Jović, 2012). In December 2012 meeting of NATO foreign ministers in Brussels, Croatian foreign policy minister said – regarding three of the four aspiring countries from the region; Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Macedonia – how “Croatia plays an important role here, as we believe that NATO membership contributes to the stabilization of the region”.<sup>10</sup> The January 2013 meeting of Croatian and Serbian prime ministers in Belgrade is also a showcase of such supportive actions where Croatian PM stated how “Serbia would have a more difficult EU pathway than Croatia” and urged Serbia to ask for help, adding that “Croatia will be fair”.<sup>11</sup> And the latest, in March 2013 Croatian President directly addressed the issues of cooperation with neighbouring countries once Croatia becomes a EU member, saying how “Croatian borders will not become a *Great Wall of China* for the neighbouring countries”, with a special emphasis on economic cooperation.<sup>12</sup> In the same speech Josipović highlighted Croatian strategic goals for the forthcoming future, including Croatia’s intentions of becoming a “small power”, which can be seen as one of the possible strategic goals for the fourth era of Croatian foreign policy, as well as further strengthening of the “strategic alliance with the US” (Jović, 2011).

There are two groups of potential obstacles on the path to full policy of cooperation and consensus with neighbouring countries striving towards the EU membership:

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9 Some authors often go even further in order to present the alleged wrongdoings of Croatia, all the way to WWII and the establishment of NDH, which is absolutely malevolent because of the clear separation from that period of Croatian “statehood” – which was actually severely limited from the perspective of actual sovereignty – in the Croatian Constitution itself and behaviour of all relevant modern policy actors in Croatia.

10 Cited from the official press-release of Croatian Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs

11 Milanović deliberately went even further with a direct call to cooperation. Citing: “Come to us for help. We will be fair and you will see that it will be so. Croatia will do its best without an ulterior motive.” Such discourse is new in Croatian-Serbian relations and was met with great interest in Serbia.

12 Excerpts from Ivo Josipović’s speech at the Faculty of Law in Split

possible backfires on domestic policy field and a vast number of unsolved bilateral disputes Croatia has within the region. As pre-2013 scholar works on the subject of the position Croatia should take towards neighbouring countries once it becomes a EU member (and especially towards Serbia) pointed out, the true challenge for Croatian foreign policy actors was the gain of an appropriate domestic support towards proactive and constructive behaviour within the region. Jović pointed out how “[Croatian nationalists] will almost certainly oppose any further softening of the EU border, because it is the border that divides Europeans from the Others, in particular from Bosnians and Serbs, who should – according to Croatian nationalists – be kept permanently out of Europe”. However, in the very conclusion he predicts a drastic change of expected nationalist narrative due to “deep political and cultural changes that EU membership brings” (Jović, 2011:33).<sup>13</sup> In his other analysis Jović points out that “discussions within domestic policy field will be made on new lines of separation – on one side there will be those who expect EU membership to be used as an instrument to fight unilateral policy in order to meet some nationalistic goals (especially towards the neighbouring countries), and on the other there will be the advocates of further harmonization with the EU goals in order to strengthen the Union” (Jović, 2011). Tvrtko Jakovina points out how Croatia faced an “isolation towards eastern neighbours with its constant escaping the connotation of Western Balkans”, which was mainly attributed to “the psychological issues that Croats (or policy actors) cannot accept related to the (geographical) position in the region” (Jakovina, 2010:89).

Surprisingly, the recent initiatives towards greater cooperation by the main Croatian foreign policy actors – as described before – did not face negative reactions from Croatian conservatives and have not been met by any substantial backlash from nationalistic domestic parties. The reasons for such normative acceptance can be seen from the prism of realism and political pragmatism: even the Croatia’s biggest conservative party, HDZ, has a long-term strategy of being accepted as a pro-European party that supports all the EU (and also US) foreign policy goals. At the same time HDZ is currently preparing for domestic regional elections and it also expects to win the upcoming parliamentary elections in 2015. Knowing how Croatian domestic policy is under strict observance of European policy actors – and knowing how the Slovenian unilateral actions and reactions towards Croatia produced a sincere concern over Janša’s government in Brussels – HDZ has almost completely abandoned the somewhat expected nationalism paradigm. Although some could expect negative rhetoric over normatively liberal positions of social-democrats regarding the new phase of Croatian foreign po-

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13 As Jović concludes, “Once the country joins the EU, these same people, the elite and voters alike, will try to exploit the EU in an effort to disassociate Croatia from the remaining Balkans, namely from Serbia, first and foremost, but also from Bosnia and Herzegovina.”

licy, the results of research on EU-related attitudes of political parties in Croatia (and Serbia) from 2012 have shown that even the conservative and nationalists parties are supporters of the EU integration processes (Stojić, 2012). Even more so, HDZ shifted towards expressing an undisputed support towards a constructive multilateral regional policy of Milanović's government.<sup>14</sup> Such development is a clear showcase that one of the possible obstacles towards a proactive policy in the region has been potentially ruled out.<sup>15</sup>

The real challenges in the domestic policy field will come with the actual beginning of the accession process of neighbouring countries for the same reasons Slovenia officially disputed the Croatian accession – various political and border (territory) disputes. Constructive solving of these disputes will be the main Croatian test polygon for both domestic and foreign policy actors.

In the final months prior to the accession, in March 2013, Croatia solved only some of the numerous disputes or issues it has with its neighbours. A recent dispute with Slovenia about Ljubljanska banka has been successfully solved in a bilateral agreement (thus removing the normative obstacle to ratify the accession treaty expressed by Slovenia) but questions of Krško nuclear plant and ongoing border disputes in both land and sea, where Croatia and Slovenia are engaged in a legal battle over border disputes at the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Hague that should be finalized either in late 2014 or in early 2015, remain unsolved.

The question of borders with Bosnia and Herzegovina will be one of the key challenges, because of the actual length of the border (over 1000 kilometres with 50 or even 60 border crossings of various categories) and its implications on Croatia being a member of the EU. The finalization of the agreement on a special border regime with Bosnia and Herzegovina was the main topic of the trilateral Croatia-BiH-European Commission meeting held in Brussels in February 2013. The regime will tackle many of the potential problems regarding border regime and will stay in force until BiH meets the requirements of becoming a full EU member. The bilateral and multilateral mechanisms over the forthcoming issues regarding the economy, transport and the regime for people with dual citizenship are already on the way, but potentially sensitive disputes over small islands of Veliki and Mali Škoj or bordering over river Una in Hrvatska Kostajnica and BiH Kostajnica will remain problematic – especially because of the complex policy situation within Bosnia and Herzegovina and the call for almost different foreign

14 Commenting on the meeting of Milanović and Dačić in Belgrade, HDZ president Tomislav Karamarko highlighted how “good relations are an impetus for both Croatia and Serbia. The ice on the relations has to melt”.

15 With the 2012 ICTY verdict of acquittal of Gotovina and Markač and public expressions of Gotovina on the need to get over the past and turn to the future in the region, the majority of Croatian conservative voters shifted their views towards the EU and Serbia in particular.

policies when talking to Sarajevo or Banja Luka. There are also questions of regime over Ploče harbour as well as an ongoing debate over Croatia's intention to build the Pelješac Bridge.

Border issues with Montenegro are related to the land and maritime border over Prevlaka and have been often used in disputes between both countries and often in the domestic policy field. At the moment of writing this article, the silent diplomacy of both sides is at work on the Prevlaka dispute. There is no public information about the current state of agreements but Montenegrin domestic policy has been attacked by nationalist parties accusing government of "selling Prevlaka to Croatia".<sup>16</sup>

The recent acceleration of Croatian foreign policy can be observed in convergence regarding disputes with Serbia. Croatia and Serbia have the greatest number of various issues on the table: the refugee issue, the issue of their property, housing rights, the post-war missing persons, war crime trials, and mutual suits before the International Court of Justice, pensions, company assets and disputes over succession after the breakup of Yugoslavia. Border (territory) disputes are also present, mainly over bordering at the river Danube, where both sides are pursuing their own rights over the line where state borders should be negotiated.<sup>17</sup> It has to be noted that Croatian foreign policy actors have already commenced a strategy of downplaying border disputes as something that should not be an obstacle in the newly found cooperation between the two countries. Speaking about the Danube Croatian president Josipović highlighted how "Croatia will not abuse its (EU) status to solve bilateral problems and disputes with its neighbours" and "will not stand in the way of Serbia's EU integration over an unresolved border dispute along the Danube".<sup>18</sup> Further progress in bilateral policy has been achieved in March 2013 when Foreign Affairs Minister Vesna Pusić met with the Serbian Foreign Minister Ivan Mrkić in Zagreb over the agreement on the mixed commission for outstanding issues between the two countries.<sup>19</sup> The other highly controversial issue has been tackled at the same meeting, the mutual genocide suits before the International

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16 In 2009 both sides agreed on the preparation of documents for bilateral expert groups in order to solve the Prevlaka dispute which still has its foundations in the December 2002 Agreement on Temporary Protocol for Prevlaka Peninsula. In February 2013 Montenegrin Democratic Front Party raised the question of the status of Prevlaka negotiations, calling the former prime minister and the minister of foreign affairs Igor Lukšić to "give answers about the nature of official platform used for solving the dispute with Croatia".

17 Both analysts and scholars agree how border issue with Serbia will probably not be solved through bilateral negotiations and will ultimately call for arbitration, in a similar way to the dispute with Slovenia.

18 More at the cited Balkansight link in References

19 After the meeting Pusić said how "[Croatian] job is to work on the issues left over from the past, the present issues and the changes stemming from our entry into the EU, i.e. our leaving CEFTA. But geographically, we will stay right here, and relations with our neighbors are extremely important".



Court of Justice. Pusić and Mrkić expressed a readiness to commence talks regarding the issue of bilateral withdrawal of lawsuits in the future.<sup>20</sup>

Related to politics or to territory, every example of bilateral issues is also highly sensitive within the field of domestic policy – and theoretically, any of the aforementioned disputes could be used as a potential field for exercising theoretical unilateral policy of Croatia in the years to come. Successful and constructive solving of those issues will be the main challenge for both Croatia as an EU member, as well as for the political actors of neighbouring countries waiting for their membership – especially in the light of a strong EU and US joint support to all the Western Balkan countries on their way towards Euro-Atlantic integrations (Jović, 2012:209).<sup>21</sup>

In 2003 the European Council established the foundation for the integration of Western Balkan countries as EU priority during the European Council summit in Thessaloniki. In 2005 relations between states have been moved from Directorate General for External Relations (DG RELEX) to Directorate General for Enlargement policy segment, which was a direct consequence of the advancement of the Stabilization and Association Process within the region. At this moment Serbia and Montenegro have the status of official candidates for accession, while Bosnia and Herzegovina is waiting for the application clearance upon the conclusion of an association agreement.<sup>22</sup>

In describing the 2013 European perspective for Western Balkans, Štefan Füle, European Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy, presented a wide overview of goals to be met by both the EU and the candidate countries. Keeping the momentum for enlargement has been presented as crucial, together with vigorous pursuit of the reforms necessary for progress on the path towards the EU.<sup>23</sup> He said that, “at the same time, taking account of the major challenges facing the European Union, enlargement policy should reflect a prudent, cautious approach based on strict conditionality”. And the aforementioned “conditionality” has bilateral issues in its very centre.

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20 They concluded how “this topic would be discussed after the previous issues, such as the missing persons issue and the processing of war crimes, were resolved”.

21 Jović argues how the EU has to learn from Croatian accession if it really wishes to secure a permanent peace in the Balkans. He advises a policy of further inclusion without which the Bosnians and Serbians would feel more isolated than they were before Croatia began its accession to the EU.

22 Macedonia and Turkey are the other countries from the wider region that also have a candidate status (as well as Iceland in Northern Europe), while Albania has not yet been recognized as an official candidate. Kosovo still have to receive an approval for negotiating their specific Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) in order to even apply for membership.

23 He has also highlighted the importance of “the promotion of economic and financial stability and supporting increased trade and business opportunities in the aspiring countries as of utmost mutual interest since it translates into growth and more jobs – which are the long-term prerequisites for stability and prosperity”, from Štefan Füle January 2013 Brussels EPP Group conference speech “Western Balkans: A future with Europe”.

Füle was very direct in the notion that the EU does not want major bilateral issues to be imported into the European Union and how the EU does not want bilateral “mines” to explode in the middle of the accession process (Grabbe, Knaus and Korski, 2010:5).<sup>24</sup> He has highlighted the Croatian and Slovenian disputes as the ones solved with the help of the European Union and proposed mechanisms of arbitration or the International Court of Justice in The Hague as ways to handle bilateral issues in the future. Temporal framework has also been proposed with the conclusion that it is “the most important that in 2013 this issue (of solving bilateral disputes) be made acknowledged as a major element of good neighbourly relations, a principle to which we will refer more and more as we move ahead. And it is important that we start to tackle these issues so that they do not hold up the accession process”.

At the very end of his address, Füle outlined the official position of the European Commission regarding the potential enlargement for every country of the region by concluding whether sufficient progress has been made, the member states “will consider whether to open the accession negotiations with Serbia and with the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, and whether to approve a mandate to start negotiations with Kosovo on the Stabilization and Association Agreement. Depending on progress, a report on Albania is also possible, while the prospect of a credible membership application from Bosnia and Herzegovina remains open. In 2013, [EC] also looks forward to the advancement of accession negotiations with Montenegro and progress in the visa dialogue with Kosovo. For all the countries of the Western Balkans, important milestones on the European path are within reach, if the conditions are met”.<sup>25</sup>

At the same time, the US foreign policy continues to see the Western Balkans and South-Central Europe as an area of priority for the United States government. In his speech at the Washington Press Center in 2012, Ambassador Philip Reeker, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, highlighted various fields of US interest for every country of the region, with special notion regarding Croatian success of EU accession, saying that “Croatia is a strong leader in the region and sets an example for other countries in the region to remind us of the hard work it takes, but indeed the benefits accrue as countries move forward in the accession track and the integration track”. Serbian candidate status and Kosovo’s Stabilization and Association Agreement have been characterized as “beneficial not only for those countries, but for the entire region”. The bilateral negotiations of Macedonia and Greece were mentioned as “an important step for those two countries to be discussing the issues that they face

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24 An interesting paper related to the 2010 state of EU enlargement presents the idea of separation of bilateral disputes from the accession process. Using examples of Cyprus and Slovenia over Croatia, the paper highlights ongoing Croatian disputes with its neighbours and calls for setting Croatia as a precedent for such praxis.

25 *ibid.*

together as neighbours in the region and as part of Europe”, while Bosnia and Herzegovina has been encouraged to “continue to work and implement the necessary legislation and other steps important in moving forward in their EU accession process as well as their NATO accession process”.<sup>26</sup>

The abovementioned examples are a showcase of a continuous strong interest of both the EU and the US to continue the integration plans for all Western Balkan countries in the Euro-Atlantic integrations. As Corina Stratulat concluded in her paper about the necessity of integration of the Balkan countries, “there is too much at stake to put Balkan enlargement on hold or drop it from the EU’s political agenda. The integration of the region with the EU remains the best – if not the only – way to deal with outstanding problems. Nothing short of the genuine prospect of full membership – including the difficult cases – will guarantee the economic and social modernization, as well as the democratic consolidation, of the Balkan countries. Leaving the Balkans in a limbo or devising peripheral-type associations in a multi-speed Europe will erode hard-won achievements, particularly in terms of peace, stability and democracy, and open up space for other ambitious actors (like Russia, Turkey or China) to compete with the EU’s influence and vision in the region” (Stratulat, 2012:2).

Special emphasis on the possible bilateral issues among candidate countries – and EU experiences of Slovenia blocking the Croatian accession have certainly influenced such a concern – shows how there will be very low tolerance for similar behaviour in the future. However, potential problems can arise in the future, especially over serious issues that Serbia has over Kosovo. Morton Abramowitz highlights how the main unfinished business regarding state-building in the Balkans revolves around Serbia. He finds Serbia central to the future of Bosnia and Kosovo and concludes that the region will not be stable until Serbia makes up its collective mind on these two countries – especially Kosovo (Abramowitz, 2011:180). There is also the question of Republika Srpska, which remains a persistent bully to the stability of Bosnia and Herzegovina – where Croatia projects many of its long-term domestic and foreign policy interests. The real influence and newfound policy of the EU will also be tested in the ongoing dispute of Greece and Macedonia, more prominent in light of a rising Greek nationalism ignited by the economic crisis – where issue of Macedonia can be used to further distance Athens from Brussels in the field of domestic-related policies. Such problems are the fields where the EU (and the US) will certainly test its patience and readiness to continue with the integration policies once the enlargement returns to the agenda.

Everything aforementioned clearly and undoubtedly points how any type of unilateral policies should be completely ruled out, not only for Croatia and its relations with its neighbours but also among the candidate countries themselves. At this moment

26 From 2012 P.T. Reeker’s address to journalists in Washington; US Department of State

Croatian political actors are displaying a great amount of understanding for the long-term goals of the EU (and the US) in the region and it can be said that Croatian foreign policy has already painted the first lines on brand new canvas of the new phase of its cooperative and constructive foreign policy. Recent issues regarding the *European arrest warrant and the surrender procedures between Member States* that were solved only after the EU had threatened Croatia with sanctions after the Croatian government refused to remove the limit on the application of the European Arrest Warrant were a showcase of Croatian testing of its newfound strength. Without surprise, Croatia announced it will amend its laws to fall in line with the EAW laws, but also gave the Croatian policy makers an important lesson about the seriousness of actual challenges of foreign policy making in the Union.

Much larger challenges are approaching Croatia because of the ongoing economic instability within the EU. A plethora of potential problems that will shape the very future of Europe through the next decade will bring an additional call for seriousness and dedication in achieving the strategic goals of the Union. The example of Slovenia has shown how unilateral doings are unwelcome in Brussels. It remains to be seen what Croatian policy actors can learn from that recent example in both the short and the long run. In July 2013 Croatia reached its long-awaited goal to become a full member of the European family. Croatian policy actors should accept the historical responsibility and start to pursue the policy that will benefit the interests of Croatia and its citizens for the longest period possible.

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### *Sažetak*

Treba li Hrvatska usmjeriti značajne napore svoje vanjske politike prema susjednim zemljama i njihovom procesu pristupanja u članstvo Europske unije? Može li potencijalni zaokret prema proaktivnoj politici pomoći Bosni i Hercegovini, Srbiji i Crnoj Gori u procesu pristupanja EU zapravo postati jedna od ključnih aktivnosti u uspostavi Hrvatske kao važne nove članice EU, koja može djelovati u međusobnom i dugoročnom interesu Unije? Moguća snažna suradnja Hrvatske s drugim državama Zapadnog Balkana u njihovom procesu pristupanja EU mogao bi biti jedan od najvažnijih potencijalno korisnih srednjoročnih ciljeva hrvatske vanjske politike. Takav teoretski pomak fokusa mogao bi postati poticaj za ostvarenje željene uloge regionalnog lidera na dugoročnoj osnovi - pogotovo s obzirom na politiku EU-a i SAD-a i njihovom vizijom o budućnosti Jugoistočne Europe i Zapadnog Balkana u narednom desetljeću. Jednostrana politika prema susjednim državama kandidatkinjama, koju je provodila Slovenija prema Hrvatskoj tijekom pristupnog procesa Hrvatske, treba biti apsolutno isključena zbog vlastitog hrvatskog interesa. Namjernim izbjegavanjem bilo kakvih sličnosti s negativnom slikom Slovenije zbog načina na koji je tretirala hrvatski pristupni proces, Hrvatska bi se trebala predstaviti kao rješavatelj problema, a ne njihov stvaratelj - što će biti najbolja dugoročna strategija u pozicioniranju zemlje na novu globalnu mapu koje će označiti kraj aktualnoj krizi u ovom području, te postati žarište interesa EU.

*Ključne riječi:* Hrvatska, EU, vanjska politika, Balkan, multilateralizam

